

upfront



50 years of Ziggy Stardust

Marking five decades since the release of one of David Bowie's most iconic albums, singer and formative confidante of his (among other legends of the era) Dana Gillespie will be in Cardiff for an intimate celebratory weekend. *Adam England* got a taste of what audiences can expect to hear from her storied life.

"I haven't been to Cardiff for a while," Dana Gillespie tells me, "I've always loved the city, but haven't been there for a while."

The 73-year-old will be heading back to the Welsh capital on Sat 18 June, however, for the Newsoundwales Bowie Weekend. She's taking part in *An Evening With Dana Gillespie*, – speaking to David Owens as part of a weekend of events set to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the David Bowie classic *The Rise And Fall Of Ziggy Stardust And The Spiders From Mars*.

"I haven't a clue how the evening will go because one waits to get the vibe from the audience," she explains. "I'll tell whatever stories come to my head ... Maybe we'll do an acoustic version of *Andy Warhol*."

"What I really like from these talks are the questions and answers at the end of it, so I hope that people will think up some interesting questions. I don't care how crazy and off-the-wall they are – it's always amusing!"

Gillespie, whose book *Weren't Born A Man* came out last year, and Bowie went back decades – they first met in their teens. "It was 1963 or 1964 – I'd just started going to the Marquee Club, the top blues club. One night there was Bowie, but he was still called David Jones and the Manish Boys in those days," Gillespie explains.

"The main thing that stuck, in a way, to our friendship, was wanting to be known as songwriters," Dana explains. "He would listen to my very naive newly-penned songs, and he played me some of his. I was at home one day when he called and said, 'I've just written a



song – I want to come and play it to you'. He came in, and he played *Space Oddity* to me, so I heard it when it was just created."

Gillespie talks about their respective careers, describing Bowie as "far better at networking with important people than me", while the pair would eventually both get signed. Dana would sign to the legendary Decca Records, while Bowie signed to Deram Records, a subsidiary.

"And then [David] called me one day," says Gillespie, "and said 'I think I've found the perfect man to be our manager'. And this was Tony DeFries, who started the company MainMan, which was, in a way, very pivotal in catapulting Bowie to the next level of superstardom."

"He was taken to the next level, thanks to DeFries and his clever planning and mad ideas. But he always accepted Bowie's ideas, as well. When they decided to kill off Ziggy Stardust, I was in the room when it was being discussed the night before."

Did Gillespie ever think that Bowie would become the huge megastar he did back in those early days? "The answer is no way," she says. "America was sort of a dream away – charter flights hadn't been invented; a lot of people after the war didn't even have passports. I don't think anyone thought about the American side of it ... I can't even say it was a dream."

Gillespie tells me that she started writing songs at 11. Further into her teens, she had her first manager and her first record deal. However, "nothing was ever planned; there was no template. A 'pop star' didn't exist – you were a singer. The most you could do was make your singles and hope that it would sell or that the BBC would play it."

Certainly, it would be fair to say that Dana has had a rather good career. From her beginnings in folk to her current blues output, her discography is prolific, and she tells me that she's already got gigs booked for next year. And what about the next volume of her autobiography? Well, "that takes a bit of just sitting in a chair, looking thoughtfully at the sky, and waiting for the right mood to strike."

Seligman Theatre, Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, Sat 18 June.

Tickets: **£12.50.**

Info: chapter.org